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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, PRM, EAP/CM, EAP/K
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E.O. 12958: DECL: AFTER KOREAN UNIFICATION
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [KN](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: UNHCR'S BEIJING REPRESENTATIVE DISCUSSES REFUGEES
IN CHINA WITH VISITING PRM DAS KELLY RYAN

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Daniel Shields. Reasons 1.
4 (b/d).

Summary

1. (S) Some 160 refugees and 62 asylum seekers are currently receiving UNHCR protection in Beijing, including individuals from North Korea, Pakistan, Kashmir, Iran and Iraq, UNHCR Regional Representative for China and Mongolia Veerapong Vonguarotai told Deputy Assistant Secretary for Population Refugees and Migration Kelly Ryan. Of the 19 North Korean refugees presently under UNHCR protection, two were just admitted into UNHCR care on March 27. Veerapong said Chinese officials estimate that, in the event of a theoretical situation in which there were massive flows of North Koreans into China, China could handle an influx of some 300,000 people without needing outside assistance. When asked if UNHCR could oversee the Mercy Corps-implemented Poverty Alleviation Program in the Tumen River Valley (since UNDP plans to end its involvement with the program by May 29, 2007). Veerapong said that UNHCR would have difficulty doing this because it lacks access to the border region. End Summary.

Current UNHCR Cases in Beijing

2. (S) UNHCR Regional Representative for China and Mongolia Veerapong Vonguarotai provided DAS Ryan with an update on

March 28 on the refugees currently under UNHCR protection in Beijing. He said that some 160 refugees and 62 asylum seekers are currently receiving UNHCR protection, including individuals from North Korea, Pakistan, Kashmir, Iran and Iraq. Of the 19 North Korean refugees presently under UNHCR protection, two siters were just placed under UNHCR care on March 27, he said. Two of the 19 North Koreans have been approved for resettlement in the United States and another three have requested resettlement in the United States. DAS Ryan was very surprised to learn that UNHCR is providing maintenance for non-DPRK refugee cases, some of whom have been in China for significant periods. UNHCR had not previously informed the Embassy about these cases. DAS Ryan expressed willingness to accept referrals if possible and told Veerapong that the United States might be able to help with resettling the two Iraqis, but noted that we may have trouble assisting with the two Iranians due to their possible

affiliation with the MEK.

13. (S) Veerapong said that UNHCR is anxious to see all the refugees in its care processed for resettlement as quickly as possible. The refugees live under very stressful conditions. Their freedom is constrained and they are vulnerable to physical and psychological illnesses. Adequate housing is a particular problem for UNHCR. The Ministry of Public Security requires the North Koreans in UNHCR custody to live in the expensive Chaoyang District of Beijing. UNHCR would like to find new housing in Beijing and perhaps even expand its capacity, but this would require Chinese government approval, which may be difficult to obtain. He said that he hopes resettlement processing can be reduced from the over 12 months that it currently takes.

Theoretical Mass Influx of North Koreans

14. (S) Veerapong said that he is not aware of any Chinese contingency planning to deal with a theoretical mass influx of North Koreans. He has raised the issue with Chinese officials, who said China could absorb 300,000 North Koreans without outside assistance if they did not all arrive at once. If the North Koreans were to pour in over a very short period of time however, the Chinese believe a "more aggressive approach" would be needed, such as bringing in the Chinese military to seal the border, establishing a holding area and seeing to the North Koreans humanitarian needs. The Chinese said that perhaps reaching out to the international community for assistance would be possible in such an event, he noted.

15. (S) Veerapong said UNHCR has found planning for a mass influx event to be difficult, because of UNHCR's lack of

access to the border region and its inability to obtain accurate estimates on the number of North Korean refugees that might stream into China. He said that he was encouraged to hear an official from the Ministry of Public Security ask United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Guterres how UNHCR might deal with such an event during the High Commissioner's recent layover.

Refugees in Mongolia

16. (C) DAS Ryan asked Veerapong for an update on North Koreans refugees living in Mongolia. Veerapong said UNHCR is currently discussing with Mongolia and South Korea how to improve living conditions for refugees in Ulaanbaatar, who presently live in a gymnasium converted into living quarters. According to Veerapong, South Korea favors building two new facilities for the refugees, but for logistical and security reasons, UNHCR prefers operating one facility. The Government of Mongolia can easily protect one facility, he said, noting the constant presence of DPRK agents that makes security essential. The final decision rests with Mongolia, he stated. Veerapong told DAS Ryan that the Mongolian authorities genuinely want to help the refugees, but are also concerned that their assistance be kept low-key. Ulaanbaatar knows that both the DPRK and China watch events closely in Mongolia, he added.

17. (C) DAS Ryan stressed to Veerapong that it is the ROK and not the United States that insists that North Korean refugees in Mongolia bound for the United States be kept in a separate facility from those bound for South Korea. The United States is fine with the refugees living together. Veerapong said that he was pleased to hear this.

UNHCR Working Conditions in China

18. (C) Veerapong said that UNHCR, without a formal Chinese government counterpart with which to interact, operates "alone" in China, dealing separately with various Chinese

ministries. This often leads to conflicting outcomes on the same issue. Officials from the Ministry of Civil Affairs have been the most helpful, although they are often overruled by the Ministry of Public Security. Personal relationships are essential to producing results. Referring to the recent arrest in China of two Pakistani nationals, Veerapong said that his close relations with the Chinese, not diplomatic pressure, enabled him to gain access to the detainees. He said that China is the most challenging place that he has worked in his UNHCR career.

¶9. (C) Because Beijing does not consider North Koreans in China to be refugees, providing assistance to them is often done on an ad hoc basis. However, since the DPRK's nuclear test, Veerapong has perceived a change in China's attitude toward North Korean refugees. China's attitudes changed almost overnight, he said. He noted that the Chinese have never deported refugees who are already under UNHCR protection.

¶10. (C) Veerapong said new concepts like "humanitarian space" are worth pursuing with the Chinese, but must be handled in a way that takes into consideration China's extreme sensitivity to outsiders' providing advice on what the Chinese consider domestic matters. He suggested emphasizing to the Chinese the international community's willingness to assist with the costs for such a project.

UNHCR Relations with NGOs and Third Countries

¶11. (C) The Chinese Government does not permit UNHCR to cooperate with Chinese or foreign NGOs, Veerapong said in response to a question from DAS Ryan. If the International Office for Migration were to open shop in Northeastern China, he said, they would find their operations hindered by the Chinese Government. Closer cooperation between UNHCR and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund may be possible in China. North Korean children in China could be helped in the context of programs that assist broader groups in children in China, he said.

¶12. (C) Veerapong told DAS Ryan that nearly all of UNHCR's funding for its China operations is provided by the United States. Even though most North Korean refugees in China are resettled in South Korea, the ROK is anxious to keep a low profile on its refugee assistance. Although the ROK does not fund UNHCR, for North Korean-related efforts, it does financially support activities in other countries, including Mongolia, where South Korean funds pay for nearly all of the costs for health care and humanitarian aid to North Korean refugees.

Operations in Hong Kong

¶13. (C) Turning to UNHCR operations in Hong Kong, Veerapong told DAS Ryan that, despite the relatively smooth processing procedures and faster turnaround times, Hong Kong UNHCR has a current backlog of over 2,500 cases. Two hundred refugees a month from various countries arrive in Hong Kong and are processed by UNHCR. UNHCR officials are concerned that speedy resettlement will attract even more refugees to Hong Kong and stretch already limited resources. With resettlement options limited and local integration not possible, most refugees in Hong Kong are resettled in the United States and Canada, as well as in Australia and in Nordic countries.

Asylum Provision Nears Completion

¶14. (C) Veerapong said that formal legislative and administrative provisions governing the granting of asylum in China are in the final drafting stages. However, China has yet to decide which ministry will be responsible for implementing the provisions. UNHCR favors the Ministry of

Civil Affairs, he said, adding that the Ministry of Public Security's involvement in this process will likely complicate UNHCR efforts.

RANDT